

**Yom Kippur Day 2016
“In God We Trust?”
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas**

I don't think I can ever remember such a sorry year. Oh, I don't mean the year itself – it was actually not so bad. I mean a year in which so many people professed to being sorry. This was the year of the apology. (Or as they say on Saturday Night Live – Apple-logy)

Why are the words: “I'm sorry” so difficult to say? It wasn't always that way. Remember when we were kids? “I'm sorry.” “You are?” “Yeah...wanna make up?” “Okay.” It was so easy back when we were kids. But now, as Donald Trump is learning, it can be so hard. Doesn't it seem like the more you need to say, “I'm sorry,” the less likely you are to say it? And the more you need to hear, “I'm sorry,” the less likely you are to accept it when you finally do hear it?

This past week has been quite a lesson in how *not* to apologize. As a rabbi, as someone who spends a lot of time encouraging people to apologize. As a rabbi who spends a lot of time teaching people *how* to apologize, here are a few of the things one should *not* do when apologizing:

When you apologize – don't say but there are others who are worse than me.

When you apologize don't blame other people or other circumstances.

When you apologize don't do anything that tries to minimize the wrong you have committed.

When you apologize don't say: “that is not who I am,” – clearly that is who you am. What you want to say is: “that is not who I want to be.”

The kids have an expression: “Sorry, Not Sorry.” There is even a hashtag sorry not sorry. Sorry Not sorry is their way of saying – I know *you* think I should apologize but *I don't* - so sorry, not sorry.

You know what I would have wished Mr. Trump had said? I wish he had just said, “I'm sorry. I was wrong. I shouldn't have done it and I am sorry that I did.” Look, we have all said things that in retrospect we wish we hadn't. But, if confronted by them – the thing to do is admit you were wrong, express regret, promise to try and do better period. No ifs, ands or buts. The secret to a successful apology is that it be honest, sincere and simple. It is really not that complicated. His job is to apologize. Our job is to forgive him. But we can't do our job until he does his.

And my friends, in this sorry year, it is not just our presidential candidates who are having a hard time saying, “I'm sorry.” Remember when Olympic swimmer Ryan Lochte gave that non-apology apology for his behavior at the Rio Olympics. “I am sorry for my behavior that took the focus away from the games themselves...” A non-apology apology is one that is framed in the language of an apology but if you listen to the actual words – is not an apology at all. “I'm sorry that you feel that way.” Is the most common non-apology apology – it sounds like you are saying you are sorry but not for anything you might have done. Another common example is the “mistakes were made...” apology that does not specify what those mistakes were or acknowledge any regret over having made them. (Lochte's clearly falls in this category) And one of my favorites of this genre of non-apology is the “if” apology and I'm afraid Mr. Trump did this as well, – “if I have offended anyone, I am sorry...” Here the “apologizer” does not even know what it is exactly he did wrong and expends no effort to find out.

I wonder what Brian Williams was thinking as he watched Lester Holt moderate a debate in front of 100 million people? He used to be the host of Nightly News. Do you remember what got him demoted? For years he offered a story that was not true. And then a little over a year ago, after it this was revealed, he took to his anchor chair to apologize for misleading the public. And then his real problems started. His apology offered an explanation to why his original statement was not true by offering a defense that was also not true. Look, I like Brian Williams, but the advice I would have given him, is if you are going to apologize for a lie, don't lie in the apology! Be honest and sincere and trust that we will forgive you. Ah, but trust is hard to come by these days.

Clearly we are having a problem with this apology thing and I think it *is* because we have a trust problem. We don't bother asking for forgiveness, because we no longer trust that if we do, we will be forgiven. And we are no longer prepared to forgive because we do not trust the sincerity of the apologizer when he does. It becomes a vicious cycle and I am worried what it is doing to us as a country, as a people and as individuals. I don't know how you felt after the Presidential Debate this past Sunday night, but if you were like me, I doubt you count it as one of our prouder moments as a nation. We cannot build a nation on a foundation of distrust.

Our young people are the most distrustful of all. In a recent study by the Pew Research Center only 19% of millennials said that they believe "most people can be trusted..." I think this is sad. There is a rising culture of paranoia and conspiracy-mongering that is changing the very character of our nation.

On this Yom Kippur Day, I think we need to spend a few minutes talking about trust. On this sacred Day of Judgment, I would like to speak to you about forgiveness; about the importance of forgiving and being forgiven. This day is ultimately about forgiveness and forgiveness is ultimately about trust; about trusting God, trusting each other, trusting ourselves.

Traditional Jews who do trust God, enter shul on this sacred day – confident and optimistic. Liberal Jews who are not so trusting of God, are more cautious and nervous about the day's outcome. Traditional Jews enter shul today prepared to forgive and to be forgiven. Liberal Jews are not the forgiving type and worry that God isn't either. My challenge today is to help you become a more traditional Jew.

"In God we trust."

Did you know that is the official motto of the United States of America?

"In God we trust." Yep – in 1956 an act of Congress made it our national motto. It appears to have originated in the Star Spangled Banner – which was written in the War of 1812. But truth is – it is older, much older than that.

"In God we trust." Some contemporary Americans have a problem with the "God" part of this motto – fearing it violates the establishment clause of the Constitution but most scholars say it is not a problem as it is not coercive and does not promote any one denomination over another. No the God part of this motto is not the part I have trouble with - it's the trust part. I remember when I was a kid there was this store that had a big sign behind the counter that read: "In God we trust, all others pay cash." Cynicism was always a big part of the American

psyche – but these days: “In God we trust?” I don’t think so. In 2016, we Americans don’t trust anyone or anything and a nation that does not trust, in God or man – cannot survive.

Why is it so hard for us to trust others and apologize? Well, for one – it makes us flawed, it makes us vulnerable, something we no longer want to be, something any presidential candidate tries desperately to avoid. I think it makes us human something all of us should embrace.

“I don’t know about you – but I don’t trust the other candidate.” If there has been any discernable theme to this whole presidential election campaign it has been distrust. By now most of us have chosen sides - we certainly don’t trust the other candidate, but truth be told, we are not all that confident in our own candidate either. When we defend our guy – whoever he or she may be – many of us say, “well it’s better than the alternative.” Not exactly what I would call a ringing endorsement – better than the alternative is an argument that we use to justify the pains and debilities of old age not our choice for president of the United States! Some of this can be laid at the feet of our sad political system wherein PAC’s spend hundreds of millions of dollars destroying the reputation of the “other guy.” With those kinds of resources, I could probably convince you that Mother Theresa was a scam, and these guys are not Mother Theresa. And while they have done their share to earn our distrust, truth be told, we don’t give them much incentive to be honest. The system is designed to pounce and destroy at the slightest hint of error or vulnerability – there is zero tolerance for the kind of slack and understanding we would hope that most of us would be granted if the light was shining on us. Can we blame them for their efforts at subterfuge? And yet – justifiable or not, understandable or not – the net result of this is a campaign where the two leading candidates have the highest level of “unfavorables” in our history.

As a nation, as a people, and as individuals we are not in a very forgiving mood.

A rabbi, ascends the bema on Yom Kippur to deliver his sermon and he held his infant daughter in his arms. The little girl was perhaps a year old and she was adorable. From her father’s arms she smiled at the congregation. Every heart melted. Turning toward her daddy, she patted him on the cheek with her tiny hands. He smiled fondly at her and with his customary dignity began a rather traditional Yom Kippur sermon, talking about the meaning of this Day of Judgment.

The baby girl, feeling her father’s attention shift away from her, reached forward and grabbed his nose. Gently he freed himself and continued his sermon. After a few moments, she took his tie and put it in her mouth. The entire congregation chuckled. The rabbi rescued his tie and smiled at his daughter. She put her tiny arms around his neck. Looking at his congregation over the top of her head, the rabbi then said: “Think about it. Is there anything she can do that you could not forgive her for?” throughout the large sanctuary, people began to nod in recognition thinking perhaps of their own children, of their own grandchildren. Just then, she reached up and grabbed the rabbi’s eyeglasses. Everyone laughed out loud. Retrieving his eyeglasses and settling them on his nose, the rabbi laughed as well. Still smiling, he waited for silence. When it came he asked, “And when does that stop? When does trust get replaced by suspicion and cynicism? At three? At seven? At fourteen? At thirty-five? How old does someone have to be before you forget that everyone is a child of God and worthy of being forgiven?”

Thousands of years ago the Psalmist declared:

יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּטַח בַּיהוָה; עֲזָרְךָ וּמִגְנָם הוּא

Israel, trust in the Lord, He is your help and your shield.

In God we trust. That has been the hallmark of our people for thousands of years. And I beg you not to give up on that trust now.

On June 17, 2015, Dylan Roof a white 21-year old was welcomed into a bible study group at the mostly Black A.M.E. church in Charleston, South Carolina, affectionately called Mother Emanuel. He returned the favor by shooting and killing nine people including the church's senior pastor Clementa C. Pinkney – a tenth parishioner survived. Roof later confessed that he hoped his actions would ignite a race war. Most of us have become numb to the mass shootings that have become a part of our American landscape. Our impotency to pass any kind of sensible gun control and the increase in hatred and distrust is a sad prescription for more of these tragedies in the future. Is in any wonder that synagogues and churches that were once known for our open doors, now have guards and in some cases even armed guards and metal detectors at the entrance; is it any wonder that we have become so distrustful? (BTW when you leave today, take a moment to say thank you to our guards – I feel better that they are here – and I imagine you do to.)

But here is where the story at Mother Emanuel turns from tragic to fascinating. A few weeks later, the Rev. Norvel Goff Sr. who was appointed head pastor in the wake of the tragic death of his predecessor, delivered a sermon where he told the congregation that he is often asked why so many members of the church have been able to forgive Dylan Roof – the man who came into their church with so much hatred in his heart. He said members deal with their grief and everything else by living one day at a time. We all think he needs to face justice for what he did and some of us cannot forgive what he did. But, and here I want to quote him exactly, "We've been preaching about forgiveness in Sunday school and in bible school, we forgive because our God commands us to 'love your neighbor as yourself.' ...Our faith is stronger than fear. We still have the audacity and temerity to believe that love overtakes hate." *That*, my friends, is what it means to be forgiving, that is what it means to trust in God – most of us are a long way from that kind of faith.

Cynicism is the dominant mood in contemporary American life. We have become so cynical, so untrusting that when we come upon someone who treats us civilly we do not trust them, we assume they have an ulterior motive. Reverend Samuel Proctor was a minister of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Harlem where Adam Clayton Powell formerly served. He taught a course at Columbia University back in the early 90's and as he was once going up in the elevator at Columbia and a young woman, probably a student, got into the elevator. As was his custom, he tipped his hat to her. And the woman reacted hostilely. She said to him: "Why are you tipping your hat at me? I'm just as good as you are! And I think it is patronizing, and insulting and demeaning for you to tip your hat at me!" This is a familiar feature on our college campuses today, they even have a term for it, it is called micro-aggressions. Micro-aggressions are defined as any subtle but offensive comment or action directed at a minority or other non-dominant group that is often unintentional. And the thing that makes these micro-aggressions so pervasive – is that if I *perceive* your comment as being offensive, then offensive it is regardless of your intention. In a world where you don't trust me or anyone – then you certainly don't trust the innocence of the things I or anyone else says – so micro-aggressions can be found everywhere.

But back to Reverend Proctor, he quietly let the woman vent her anger and then he replied: "Well, ma'am, if you really want to know why I tipped my hat, I'll tell you, but you will have to get out of the elevator if you want to know, because it will take me a couple of minutes to explain." They got off the elevator and he said: "I wanted you to know that if a man got into this elevator and tried to push you around, he would have to deal with me. And I wanted you to know that if the elevator became stuck between floors, even though I know how to climb out, I wouldn't do that, until I helped you out first. And I wanted you to know that if you got sick in the elevator that I wouldn't get off at my floor, but that I would stay with you until you got better or until you got help. And frankly, ma'am, it would have taken me too long to say all that to you when you got on, so I just tipped my hat to you instead."

In God we trust? I don't think so; we no longer even trust each other.

A recent study by American Automobile Association suggests that 80% of drivers admitted to expressing significant anger, aggression or road rage in the past year – 80%! Such behavior includes tailgating, aggressive horn honking, blocking and cutting off other drivers and offering another driver an obscene gesture.

And men are three times more likely to do it than women, according to experts who study driving habits. Here is the scene – you are getting off the Cross Island Parkway and waiting to take the exit ramp to the L.I.E. Traffic is really backed up – and the line forms a good mile up the road on the Cross Island – you anticipate this and get in the back like the good citizen you are. Then just as you finally make it to the exit – someone from the middle lane tries to cut in front of you after you have waited all this time. Do you, a) assume they discovered the need to get off too late and help a lost driver get in the exit line at the last minute or b) know it is some smart-aleck - the rules don't apply to me - wise-guy, who thinks *they* don't have to wait in line like everyone else and your job is to make sure they don't profit from their evil ways?

Do you see what we have become? Do you see what all this distrust is doing to us? I have heard stories of drivers who were not so nice in our own parking lot, after shul on The High Holy Days! If what we do here wears off before you even get out of the parking lot – what hope do we have for a civil society? How is this possible? Has the disconnect become so great that even here and even now we can be suspicious of the motives of those around us? We used to parody the hypocrisy of those who were pious in the pew and pathetic on the street – well now we have solved *that* problem, we act poorly on the street *and* in the synagogue as well.

Back to politics. The debates have been quite a spectacle and I suspect the final one will be as well. But next time, I want to direct your attention not to the debate itself but to its aftermath. There is something called the "spin-room" where surrogates of the candidates speak to the press and try and spin the story of how their candidate performed. Now that the debate is over, their task is to try and influence the narrative, the way we perceive what just took place. Each surrogate steps up to the microphone armed with a list of things they believe their candidate did right and a list of all the things that the other candidate did wrong. Each surrogate wants to focus on his candidates good list and ignore their bad list – while the reporters try and get them to do just the opposite. And as I watched this rather bizarre dance going on I realized that we all do this, trying to focus on our candidates good list and ignore their bad list. Watch the next time you speak to someone who is voting for the "other" candidate, the one you don't support. The conversation goes something like this: "How can you vote for x he/she said or did – fill in the blank with the long list of things you don't like about

“the other candidate.” And then your friend will inevitably respond with their long list of complaints against your candidate totally ignoring the list we gave them about their guy/gal. You know what I realized, I realized that we all treat our favorite candidate a lot like we treat ourselves – we minimize their faults and maximize their attributes.

We do the exact same thing when it comes to the list of our own shortcomings as opposed to the shortcomings of others. We are so critical of others, and so forgiving of ourselves. We trust ourselves – but that is where our willingness to trust ends. When we do something wrong – we have a million self-justifying excuses – the result of which is to enable us to conclude about ourselves – “See, I am not so bad!” And yet we do not extend the same tolerance to others – we are extremely unforgiving of anyone except ourselves.

There is a midrash which says that God gave us two eyes – one to see our own faults and the other to see the goodness in those around us; but, the midrash goes on to suggest, most of us are cross-eyed – seeing only the goodness in ourselves and the fault in others. God wants us to see the good in others. But that is not the way we see things, because we no longer trust each other. But, you know who is really good at this way of looking at the world? God. But we no longer trust in God either.

Let me teach you one of my favorite God stories, which like most God stories are really man stories. This one is found in Bereishit Rabbah chapter 8 – (Bereishit Rabba is a midrashic collection that may date back to the 3rd century). When God wanted to create the universe, God went about His work pretty confidently, as you might expect God to do. In six days God created the Heavens and the Earth and all they contained - clearly with so much to do and so little time to do it there was not much time for hesitation or contemplation – even God must have been quite busy to get the entire universe completed in such a short time. And if I might be so bold as to comment on God’s work – in my humble opinion God did a pretty good job. Sunrise and sunset – spectacular, the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls – magnificent. And so God went about Her work, busily bringing the universe into being – until She came to Her final act of creation – us, man – human beings. According to this lovely midrash, here God hesitated – He wasn’t sure if we were such a good idea. He wasn’t sure if we would add to this incredible world He had created or subtract from it. So God, suggests the midrash, asked the angels for help – God sought their advice. According to Rabbi Shimon, the angels quickly divided into two camps – some encouraged God to create man, some argued it would be a major mistake and God should not do it. The angel named kindness said, “Let God create man, for he will perform acts of kindness. The angel named truth said, “Let Him not create man, for he will be full of deceit.” Justice said, “Let Him create man, for he will perform righteousness; peace said, “Let Him not create man, for he will be full of divisiveness.” They took a vote and it was two in favor and two against. So poor God was no better off than He was at the outset – the vote was dead even, half the angels believed we would benefit God’s magnificent creation and the other half believed we would pollute the world.

So what did the Holy One Blessed Be He do? God took truth, and cast truth to the ground and said, let’s vote again.

I love that midrash – on so many levels. Why does God ask their opinion if He already knows what He wants to do? I think it is a touching insight into what must have been God’s ambivalence over creating human beings. God knew we would be a close call – that we humans had skills and talents that could benefit the world and jealousies and pettiness that

could destroy it. But God trusted us. God believed in us.

And here is the part of that midrash I love the most – which angel did God sacrifice in order to create man? Truth. It is as if God was saying, “You know, truth be told, you man, should not be created...the risk is awfully great, and you have within your hands the potential to destroy all that I have created, but I am going to do it. God had faith in us that it might take us a while, and in that while we would do more than our fair share of damage to God’s magnificent universe – but God had faith that eventually we would get it right.

Do you think God was right, to have faith in us? To trust us? We can only speculate why God decided to go against His better judgment and create us. But I for one, am glad that He did. And it seems to me that the least we can do, after God has placed so much trust in us, is to place our trust in God. The least we can do seeing how much God trusts us – is for us to learn to trust each other as well.

Yes, this is one of my favorite midrashim, and I have wrestled with it all of my adult life. I keep asking myself – why did God do it? Why knowing how flawed and deficient we are, knowing how much damage we are capable of doing, how much hate we will bring into His world – why did God create us? The best answer I can come up with, the only answer I have been able to come up with – is that God loves us. And when you love someone you forgive them, you cut them some slack.

I think God wants us to learn that the most important thing to learn in our sojourn through this earthly existence is how important it is to love and to be loved and to trust.

On these holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we are called on to forgive those who have hurt or wronged us. But how many of us sitting here in this sanctuary today have someone in our lives with whom we do not speak—a family member who did not treat us respectfully, a friend who betrayed our confidence or trust, someone whom we looked upon as a mentor or model but who disappointed us. Forgive them. The guy cutting in front of you in traffic – forgive him.

You see that is what a loving God does, He forgives – and that is why we can trust Him, because we know He loves us and we know He will forgive us. And that is what a loving person should do as well – forgive, and I want you to fight the cynicism and distrust that fills our world, I want you to be a loving person who trusts in a loving God.

יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּטַח בִּיהוָה; עֲזָרָם וּמִגְנָם הוּא

“I’m sorry.” “You are?” “Yeah...wanna make up?” “Okay.”

My son Ari, brought the following to my attention. He told me that in the Book: The Four Things that Matter Most, author and hospice doctor, Ira Byock reflects on the four most important things that people should say to their loved ones. The four things are: I love you, thank you, I forgive you, please forgive me. I love you, thank you, I forgive you, please forgive me. As we gather here on Yom Kippur Day, striving to live our lives better, I want to say these things to you, my community. I don’t say them often enough, but I hope that you’ll accept them now as I offer them with a sincere heart.

I love you. In the way that a rabbi loves the community that he or she serves - I love you. I love each of you as individuals and especially as a community. I love that you're open to my crazy ideas, and have built this remarkable community to promote the values I hold so dear. I love you for engaging in acts of *hesed* - of lovingkindness - supporting one another in times of need, joining in each other's celebration, comforting each other in times of sorrow. I love how you can tackle a Kiddush table. I love how you say yes when I ask you to help – with your time and with your money. I love how over these last 22 years you have made me part of your families, and shared so many of your happy and sad times with me. For all these reasons and many more, I love you. And if I don't say it enough, then let me say it again now. I love you.

Thank you. Thank you for showing up today. Thank you for being a member, for buying your kids a ticket. Thank you for inviting guests into your home. Thank you for being open to my words. Thank you for the opportunity to be your rabbi. Thank you for your generosity of time, energy and money. We could not exist as a community without any of them. For all these reasons and many more, I am grateful to each and every one of you. And if I don't say it enough, then let me say it again now. Thank you.

I forgive you. Lord knows you need it sometimes. I forgive you for cutting me off in the parking lot. I forgive you for not saying hello to me at Bagel Boss or Roslyn Kosher. I forgive you for not responding to my e-mail in a more timely manner. I forgive you for eating all the lox at Kiddush and not leaving any for me or finishing all the good scotch before I get there. I forgive you for not giving me the benefit of the doubt when perhaps you should have. I forgive you for not being kinder to each other when you sometimes could have. For all these moments and many more, I forgive. And if I don't say it enough, then let me say it again now. I forgive you.

Please forgive me. Lord knows I need it sometimes. Forgive me for cutting you off in the parking lot. Forgive me for not saying hello to you at Bagel Boss and Roslyn Kosher. Forgive me for not responding to your e-mail in a more timely manner. Forgive me for eating all the lox at kiddush and not leaving enough for you and finishing the good scotch before you get there. Forgive me for not giving you the benefit of the doubt when perhaps I should have. Forgive me for not being kinder to you when I sometimes could have. Forgive me for not visiting you in the hospital and for not caring enough. For all these moments and many more, Forgive me. And if I don't say it enough, then let me say it again now. Forgive me.

Let us not wait another moment to say these things to the people we love. Let us express our love for one another, our gratitude to one another, and our forgiveness of one another with open arms and hearts because that is what people who trust each other do.

Allow me to conclude by sharing with you a poem by Yehuda Amichai, the poet laureate of Israel that I have always loved, my good friend and colleague Rabbi Neil Kurshan reminded me of it and I share it with you including some of his thoughts about it. Let me read the beginning in Hebrew and then I will read the entire poem in English:

The Place Where We Are Right

by Yehuda Amichai

From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.
The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.
But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.

המקום שבו אנו צודקים

מן המקום שבו אנו צודקים.
לא יצמכו לעולם
פרחים באביב.

המקום שבו אנו צודקים
הוא רמוס וקשה
כמו חצר.

אבל ספקות ואהבות עושים
את העולם לתחוח
כמו הפרפרת, כמו חריש.
ולחישה תשמע במקום
שבו היה הבית
אשר נחרב.

Flowers do not grow from the soil of certitude. They grow in the places where we are vulnerable and where we doubt. They grow from our capacity to forgive. And although our doubt may destroy the houses built by our ideologies and beliefs within which we feel safe and secure, it is in the places of ruin that the whispers of life can be found.

These holidays remind us that there is only one source of absolute rightness in the world.

יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּטַח בַּיהוָה

In God we trust. As human beings our worldviews and our judgments are always imperfect. But we still need to find a way to trust each other as well, just as God found a way to trust us. It will never be written on our gravestones "He was always right." and if those words were ever to appear over our graves, needless to say, it will not be a compliment.

So, you are going to have to choose someone to vote for on November 8 – you are going to have to choose someone you trust – even though they may not be completely deserving of that trust. And if there is someone in your life with whom you have cut off all real conversation because you felt all the wrong or offense was on their side, may you be able to acknowledge your own imperfection and find a place of humility within that might lead to reconciliation. And at this Yizkor time, we need to find a way to forgive those who gave us life and are now no longer among the living. We need to trust them as well and believe they loved us even if they did not always show it in ways we needed to be loved. It may sound a little cute but there is a deep truth in the rhyme that we will only mend if we can also bend.

In the year ahead may we find the places in our lives where we can doubt. And despite our doubts may we learn to trust. And armed with that trust may we search for those places where we can love. May we unearth those places from which we can forgive. May we hear the whisper of life in all these places, for this is where we can heal. May we plough the hard and trampled soil within us so that when Spring returns, flowers can grow again from our vulnerable souls.

“I’m sorry.” “You are?” “Yeah...wanna make up?” “Okay.”